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News Release



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Revised Critical Habitat Proposed for Marbled Murrelet

Public comments accepted until November 13, 2006

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today issued a revised proposal to designate 221,692 acres of critical habitat for the marbled murrelet, a threatened species protected under the Endangered Species Act. Areas proposed for critical habitat include portions of California, Oregon and Washington.

The marbled murrelet is a small seabird that spends most of its time in the marine environment and nests in forests along the Pacific Coast. The Service identified 3,590,642 acres in the three states as critical habitat, but is proposing to exclude 3,368,950 acres already protected under other existing regulations or plans, such as the Northwest Forest Plan, state and tribal management plans and habitat conservation plans. An additional 1,574,201 acres were considered but not included in the proposal because they already are managed in ways that meet the needs of the marbled murrelet. These include federal wilderness areas, tribal conservation easements and Redwood state and national parks.

If the proposed exclusions are finalized, the final critical habitat designation will include 112,037 acres in California, 82,747 acres in Oregon and 26,908 acres in Washington. After the exclusions, approximately 1 percent of the proposed area is federal land, 80 percent is city, county or state land, and 19 percent is private land. These are areas not covered by a management plan that provides protection to the marbled murrelet and its habitat.

“The implementation of various management plans in the Pacific Northwest already provides protection for murrelet habitat and makes the designation of critical habitat redundant,” said Ren Lohoefer, Acting Director of the Service’s Pacific Region. “Our proposal recognizes the value of these efforts and encourages landowners and organizations to continue these endeavors for long-term conservation. It also serves as an invitation to landowners without a management plan to work with us to develop one.”

Today's proposal would revise a 1996 critical habitat designation for the marbled murrelet that includes nearly 3.9 million acres. The proposal designates only those areas of suitable habitat known to be occupied by marbled murrelets and to contain features essential to the species' survival. Consistent with the 1996 designation, no marine areas are being proposed for designation because, while they are important to the life history of the birds, we are unable to define specific areas essential to the conservation of the species.

Areas designated as critical habitat contain habitat essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. A designation does not set up a preserve or refuge and has no specific regulatory impact on landowner actions on non-federal land that do not involve federal

agency funds, authorization or permits. However, landowners must avoid actions on their property that could harm or kill protected species, or destroy their habitat, unless they first obtain a permit, regardless of whether critical habitat has been designated.

In 30 years of implementing the ESA, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the ESA including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many national wildlife refuges managed by the Service and on state wildlife management areas.

The proposed critical habitat rule was published in today's Federal Register. The proposed rule, maps and descriptions of the areas proposed for critical habitat can be found at

<http://www.fws.gov/pacific/marbledmurrelet>.

Comments must be submitted by November 13, 2006, to Ken Berg, Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Western Washington Fish and Wildlife Office, 510 Desmond Drive, Suite 101, Lacey, Washington 98503-1273. Comments also may be faxed to 360-753-9405 or submitted by email to MurreletCH@fws.gov.

The new proposal is based on updated information and is part of a court settlement agreement with the American Forest Resource Council. The Service completed a recovery plan for the marbled murrelet in 1997 and a 5-year status review of the species in 2003.

An economic analysis of the critical habitat proposal will be completed and released for public comment before final critical habitat for the marbled murrelet is designated. The final designation is scheduled to be made by August 30, 2007.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 542 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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